Decisions, Decisions
Narrative Video Games, Perspectivization and Implicit Politics

Soraya Murray

Introduction

As playable stories, narrative-based video games contribute to a larger technocultural imaginary. Video games convey ideologies through their representations, but also through their imaginaries around science and technology—or in other words, the mechanics of power within our increasingly technological lives. My investment in critical game studies is an extension of an interest in the formation of the modern subject in relation to computational technology. As part of those larger considerations, I am fascinated by the persuasive functions of narrative-based games, and the many layers of design and user experience that together constitute an articulated politics.[1] To illuminate possible meanings and implications (or what I refer to as the "stakes") of narrative and generally cinema-inspired game worlds, my scholarship has relied heavily on considerations of ideological and socio-political context. In my recent work, other elements become increasingly striking for their impacts on this conversation, such as the poetics and aesthetic dimensions of video games, and the underlying political affects that are conveyed through sustained exposure in a game world. (cf. Murray 2020: 42-49) That is to say, the narrative of a video game matters, and is something of which the player will almost always be completely aware. But there are also messages conveyed through the mechanics of the world created, the choices one is afforded or denied, and the more ambient affective intensities generated through gameplay.

1 Throughout this essay, I use the terms "video games" and "games" interchangeably. But I want to acknowledge that there is a larger discourse of games (analog, etc.) that exists—and which I don't intend to generalize about.

Because of this, concepts such as narrative perspectivization (an implicit understanding of something as taking a particular vantage point in order to become represented) need to be reinforced as key to the conversation about video games as culture. (cf. Igl/Zeman 2016: 7-8) However, this is a part of a larger interlocking set of qualities of the gamic form that come into play, such as its rule-based system, and the sustained experiential engagement within a gamespace, which I have earlier studied as highly ideological in nature, and which might yield durational interpretations not possible by simply viewing game images or recordings (cf. Murray 2020: 42–113; Murray 2018).

In Natalia Igl and Sonja Zeman's *Perspectives on Narrativity and Narrative Perspectivization* (Igl/Zeman 2016: 7), Zeman writes "…a narrative is a perspectival representation in a general sense as there cannot be a representation without perspectivization." This is true for video games as well. The nature of a video game is a result of specific elements made manifest as a series of expressed cultural positions, from the possibilities and limitations of its very code, to the visual and narrative elements borrowed from pre-existing forms (like film and literature), to the context in which it was made, the mode in which it is presented, and of course the experience of the subjective player. Game design and representations require perspectivization, something which is greatly underacknowledged as core to an understanding of the medium.

How do narratives in games work in regard to judgment and evaluation, and what results do those evaluations and forms of decision-making have on its rhetorical dimensions? This article explores perspectivization—or, in other words, the sense that video games present a perspective or subject position—as key for understanding how games require value-based relations at every level of their making and use. Increasingly, my work takes into account the more nebulous dimensions of games, such as their political affects especially as conveyed through aesthetic means. Beyond the surface of representation, what mechanisms are at work in shaping hearts and minds through video games as persuasive narrative objects? This article advocates for a multi-faceted approach to the apprehension and negotiation of implicit values, judgments and ethics present within video games as technological political forms. Further, I argue that a critical studies-based framework for understanding the stakes of implicitly judgement-based world-building of video games is key for designers, not just theorists.

A Game and Its Perspectivization

Narrative-based or story-driven video games typically highlight choice or ethical decision-making as a core mechanic of gameplay. Navigation of such a game involves, in this case, both the successful negotiation of action elements such as combat, puzzle-solving and collecting, as well as narrative choices. These may impact outcomes, points earned, consequences for the story that is revealed, or even player access to particular branches of the story narrative. As game scholar Ian Bogost has argued, video games are persuasive, rule-based systems with which players engage, and which make claims about the lived world. (Bogost 2010) Nuances of rule-based systems, come to impact world-making around what is possible or ideologically acceptable within the spaces of games. Therefore, the rule-based system of a game contains within it a kind of perspectivization (a combination of valuation, opinion and selection) about the world it seeks to imagine.

The above implies a sense of judgment. Within video games discourses, there exists a core friction, issuing from the tension between a game as "a series of interesting decisions" as luminary game designer Sid Meier defined it, and their origins as "objective" techno-scientific mediums of rational calculation that should not be compared with other forms of culture (cf. Alexander 2012; Aarseth 2001). Renowned for his strategy games, particularly the *Civilization* series (1991-), Meier suggests that, "[i]t's the combination of this wonderful fantasy world that you create and the interesting decisions that the player gets to make in that world that really is the sum total of the quality of your game." (Alexander 2012) Decision-making in games has even been weaponized to great effect, to create an ethical internal friction within the player – something I will discuss in the next section. The core understanding of games as fundamentally about choices, suggests a complex connection to ethics, judgment and values.

Still, up until now, the mainstream media focus on ethics, judgment and values in video games has mostly been limited to moral panics around the impact of violent games on the minds of impressionable players. To a large extent, that has been the cultural "narrative" around video games. For example, as early as in the 1970s, concerns about the pernicious effects of violence in games garnered public attention, through media coverage of the arcade game *Death Race* (1976, Exidy Games) in which the object of play was to run down humanlike "goblins" with one's race car (cf. Kocurek 2012). In the mid-1990s, concerns around the imaging of sex and violence like the gruesome fighting game

Mortal Kombat (1992, Midway Games), and the cheeky slumber party murder game *Night Trap* (1992, Digital Pictures) among others resulted in senate subcommittee hearings and, in 1994, the video game industry's voluntary agreement to self-regulate using content warning labels (cf. Kocurek 2019: 309-316). The 1999 Columbine high school shootings by Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold stirred questions about the negative influence of violent and militaristic video games, and the *Grand Theft Auto* (*GTA*) series, particularly *GTA III* and after (2001-), has led to public outcries around the glorification of crime, sex and violence (cf. Campbell 2018a). In 2011, after the Norwegian right-wing terrorist Anders Breivik massacred 77 people, many of them children, mention of his enjoyment of *World of Warcraft* were highlighted, as well as his claim that he used *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* to prepare (cf. Boghani 2012). With each new violent act, particularly one by a young white male shooter, video games re-enter the public conversation. Some journalists have argued that blaming video games is merely a tactic to draw attention from more critical issues of gun control, intolerance and mental health. In 2018, the World Health Organization classified video game addiction as a disorder, further contributing to an overall mainstream narrative of the medium as inherently corrosive and morally suspect (cf. Wakefield 2018).

These kinds of positions are, I would argue, more rooted in a negative public imaginary around video games established by early moral panics, since sociological study has proven to be at best inconclusive regarding the direct impact of violent imagery in video games on the proclivities of players. However, I mention them to give a sense of the kinds of conversations around ethical decision-making that have troubled games and tended to gain the most attention; namely, whether they are ultimately corruptive in their very form.

Video Games and Ethical Design

Among the most intriguing developments in the evolving discussion of ethical awareness in video game design is the connection between decisions enacted by a player, and the ramifications of those selections on subsequent gameplay. MIT computer scientist D. Fox Harrell has underscored the social constructions and value systems encoded into the rule-based systems of games (cf. Harrell 2013). Specifically, Harrell has explored new forms for computational narrative, gaming and social media that open up potentials for how software might convey more inclusive values. Game scholars Miguel Sicart and José P.

Zagal, among others, examine the ethics of video games from a philosophical standpoint, considering the inclusion of "wicked problems" and moral dilemmas may potentially enhance ethical self-inquiry in the player (cf. Zagal 2009; Sicart 2011; Sicart 2013; Thi/Zagal 2016). A "wicked problem", within this context, would be a unique problem that a player faces, one which has no clear solution, which impacts subsequent parts of the game (though the player may not imagine how), and which cannot be reduced to simply 'good' or 'evil' choices. As Sicart (2013: 105-106) has theorized about ethical gameplay design:

> "Wicked problems are formulations of conceptual frameworks that can be used to generate situations in which players are teased into playing using their ethical imaginations, stepping outside of the pleasures of instrumental play through a moment of pause. The response to wicked problems is player complicity. *Wicked problems make players complicit in the experience of the game*." [emphasis added] (106)

This revelation about gameplay and ethics matters because it suggests a curation of the play experience that can exploit the opportunity of a fraught scenario to generate ethical self-inquiry within the player. It proposes that story-driven gameplay can be used to draw attention to the valuation, opinion and selection enacted by a player, through the ramifications experienced within the scope of play.

Complicating this is the notion that some games contain a friction between the stated narrative contract of the game and its mechanical contract. Clint Hocking coined the term "ludonarrative dissonance" as a way of characterizing a flaw in a game, in which the actions expected of gameplay contradict the narrative message (cf. Hocking 2007). This creates a tension between the stated values of a video game, and the more subtle or structural messages that might be communicated by way of a game's rules. For example, as Hocking argues regarding his example of the legendary title *BioShock* (2007, Irrational Games and 2K Marin) a retro-futuristic dystopian game about a defunct underwater utopian society:

> "BioShock seems to suffer from a powerful dissonance between what it is about as a game, and what it is about as a story. By throwing the narrative and ludic elements of the work into opposition, the game seems to openly mock the player for having believed in the fiction of the game at all. The leveraging of the game's narrative structure against its ludic [gameplay] structure all but

> destroys the player's ability to feel connected to either, forcing the player to either abandon the game in protest (which I almost did) or simply accept that the game cannot be enjoyed as both a game and a story, and to then finish it for the mere sake of finishing it." (Hocking 2007: unpag.)

Here, Hocking expresses frustration about the apparent dissonance between narrative and gameplay. In fact, the larger lesson from his observation is that *both* elements express values—in this case made evident by their friction against each other.

But it is not necessarily a flaw when narrative and gameplay diverge. Video games, such as *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012, Yager Development) have self-consciously mobilized that dissonance, forcing the player to exist in the contradiction, by having them commit war crimes, while in the role of military shooter game 'hero'. The highly popular *Katamari Damacy* (2004, Namco) operates on a level that feels playful and sticker-like in its initial appearance, while the true and deeper message depends upon extended gameplay. In this game, the player occupies the role of a Prince, the son of the King of All Cosmos. In his drunkenness the king has destroyed the universe. One's task is to use a sticky ball to roll up objects into clusters, until they become large enough to replace missing moons, stars and eventually whole constellations. Play is technicolor, energetic, amusing, easy to learn and highly engaging. The merriment of the gameplay does not invite a critical disposition while one is swept away with its timed goals, exuberant music, and its super-flat cartoony world. Over time, the game begins to take on darker dimensions. Years after the game's release, designer Keita Takahashi revealed that *Katamari Damacy* was intended to present "an ironic point of view about the consumption-based society," which cast the thoughtless accumulation of things in a whole new light (cf. Sheffield/Caoili 2009).

In another iconic example, *Shadow of the Colossus* (2005, Team Ico and SIE Japan Studio), which is widely regarded as one of the most venerated titles in video game history, a young adventurer hero carries a dead maiden into a forbidden land in the hopes of entreating a god to summon her soul back to the living. The god agrees, but only if Wander commits to killing sixteen ancient and mysterious colossi. Through its repetitive dimensions of exploration, encounter, challenge, and destruction of something wondrous and otherworldly, the game effectively conveys an incredible sense of ambivalence. As the hero's journey wears on, slaying ancient creatures becomes morally questionable at best, in what appears a Pyrrhic pursuit for the sake of lost love. That is to say,

there is one narrative in the "story" of the game, but another set of values that emerges with the prolonged experience of playing it. The durational reveals a fraught ethics.

Other realities complexifying issues of games and ethics surely cast their own shadow over products of the lucrative and global games industry. Player intentionality is an important component, in terms of understanding to what degree choices made by players in games can be seen to effectively mirror their lived-world or 'actual' values. Still another matter is the troubled and very public hand-wringing around the games industry and its ancillary cultures, notorious for its *gender*-based and racial disparities, 'bro' culture as an extension of the tech industry, and infamously selfish Randian Objectivist value system (cf. Chang 2018). All of the above contribute to an expanding understanding of how games are ethical objects, that implicitly contain perspectives, values, judgments and forms of evaluation – and can generate those elements in players as well.

Internal Tensions

As was previously mentioned, there is a strong tension between the form of a game as issuing from rational calculation and scientific origins, and the highly subjective, selective and judgment-orientated perspectivization of values that are expressed in a video game. Its form, however is not separate from politics. The very medium of a video game as a rule-based system—such is its common understanding within game studies—ensures its perspectivization by its very nature. Each game is built on a series of selections, in order to create rules that build worlds in which players move. In addition, there is increasing theorization on video games which now begins to understand code/coding systems themselves as culturally inflected (cf. Harrell 2013). This challenges a long-held myth regarding the neutrality and objectivity of code, something that is being increasingly debunked from perspectives within code studies as well as science and technology studies, the humanities and the arts (cf. Chun 2013).

Such selective design decisions manifest themselves in presences and absences: what choices can be made within the world of the game? Which cannot? Whose story is being told? Who are the playable heroes? Who are the non-playable characters? Who can be understood to be the presumed player or audience for the game? By what means is one, as a player, able to engage

with the world—purely in terms of conquest and violence, or by other modes of engagement? Does the space open itself up? Is the experience highly controlled or self-driven? What values are conveyed in the decisions that are presented? Which acts are rewarded, and which others punished? What constitutes a win-state in the game? These questions are the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the medium of video games.

In fact, all video games can be thought of as highly perspectivized, highly selective, and perhaps implicitly, highly judgmental. A game designer must make choices, too, not just the player. And in those games that render traversable spaces, passage through them inevitably takes on ideological dimensions, both in the design phase and one's subjective experience of the finished product (cf. Murray 2020). Understanding this matters, because video games are necessarily formulated cultural objects as a fact of their construction. Thinking of them otherwise projects the false fiction of "objectivity" onto them, which I believe issues from their technological origins and the often-extreme rationalism and that cloying Randian Objectivism within the tech-oriented industries (cf. Anderson 2000).

Evidence of perspectivization and judgment can also be seen beyond the representational, in the very mode of visualization within games. True, it may exist in the overt politics of the conveyed narrative. One may also look at the cultural context in which the game was made, in what choices become viable or impossible. What scope of potential relations may be enacted in the world that is imagined? What view on the world does the game invite? But it is also connected to how a player is able to have visual access to the world. For example, I have argued that the virtual camera within the game holds a great deal of power as a tool for perspectivization. It functions as an apparatus that orders relations between the player (often via a character) and the space. Even the simple decision about whether a game is to be accessed through the first-person perspective or the third person, can make a large overall difference. Often, particularly in third-person games, the perspective resembles a floating cinematic camera eye that recreates angles that signal popular film genres like horror or action. It creates the impression of placing the player "in" the film.

A foreshadowing of this relation was famously theorized in regard to the filmic image in terms of the camera eye as articulating relations between the actor, the camera and the audience. Particularly with respect to the technological image and its reproductions, philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin famously wrote of the film actor: "The audience's identification with the

actor is really an identification with the camera. Consequently, the audience takes the position of the camera; its approach is that of testing." (Benjamin 1968: 228-229). This notion of "testing" is significant and refers to a correlation that Benjamin makes between the actor and mechanical equipment like the film camera. In this relation, the film actor is increasingly tested in terms of their ability to translate their expressivity into a form legible to the camera, and transmissible through its organizing systems. The cinematics of the in-game "camera" likewise re-adjusts this relation to the identification of the player with their character as an identification with the computational. This relation becomes about calculation, processing, problem-solving and encouraging a rationalizing view of the game world, in order for the player to come into alignment with the most optimal gameplay outcomes. In some ways, gameplay becomes about engaging with and mastering a system.

This reorganization of vision into an identification with the computational is all achieved through the perspectivization of the game. It is made possible through the view afforded onto the game world. The very notion of a "camera" is conceptually misleading as there is no camera at all: it is merely a perspectivization that simulates the lens-based camera technology, emulated through code. One might ask why this should be of any concern for the game designer, and whether ethics and aesthetic considerations of affect should come into the design process at all. Helen Nissenbaum and Mary Flanagan, for example, imagine the role of the "conscientious game designer" who is intentional about the core values they build into their video games, who seeks to build games with social impact, and considers potential unintended consequences. (Flanagan/Nissenbaum 2014: 3-13) For them, this issues from the truism that all games reflect values, a point with which I agree. However, for the sake of my argument here, I am less interested in the objective of building more ethical games, and more interested in how narrative perspectivization can be used to understand that all video games implicitly possess political dimensions.

This acknowledgement that video games contain perspectivization, selection, opinion and valuation within them should not mean wrestling the form into a condition of fictive neutrality, or demonizing those who have noticed this reality as liberal progressive "social justice warriors" bent on destroying fun. Instead, it can help critical game scholars understand the same narratives that get told again and again, in a new way. Video game analysis should account for these elements as a part of the very constitution of the medium, and should maximize this knowledge toward pushing games into new directions.

The very making of a game is dense with selection, valuation and judgment. The presence of narrative in even the most subtle application means that selectivity, valuation and judgment follow by necessity. Understanding this, one who is committed to learning about the cultural function of games can detect value systems that are implicit to the design process, and to which industry and academy alike should pay concentrated attention. Realizing the design limitations caused by such a narrow focus in perspectivization—limitations which might have resulted in the preponderance of a particular type of game—may help open up potentials for many other innovations, narratives, and perspectives.

Games and Politics: A Nascent Debate

Of late, a driving set of questions around narrativization and perspectivization in video games has arisen from the increased perception that video games have political dimensions. There has been significant journalistic attention paid to the notion that while games image political perspectives and represent fictionalized or historical political events, the makers of those games typically do not discuss their products in those terms. This conversation is, in itself, full of slippages around the notion of what it means to say that video games have a politics. For the sake of this article, I am concerned with two notions of games as political. First, I am interested in the significance of political theorist of modern technology Langdon Winner's "theory of technological politics" for video games as technological forms. The concept pertains to the politics inherent in the very design process of our technologies, and the way in which their continued presence in our daily lives shapes outcomes. Second, I will turn to the hotly-contested topic of the ethics around representing incendiary political viewpoints within video games, particularly given their status as entertainment products.

In his essay entitled "Do Artifacts Have Politics?", Winner elaborated a series of examples that linked design decisions with urgent socio-political ramifications. In his most persuasive example, he illustrated how intentionally designed, low-slung Long Island overpasses executed specific forms of power and authority, and shaped outcomes in public life. They did so by inhibiting bus traffic into key parkways. This allowed some constituencies like middle and upper class automobile-owning city goers easy access into Jones Beach State Park, while limiting the presence of the poor and others who used buses

that were too tall for the low-clearance overpasses. Winner described this as "a way of engineering relationships among people" and exerting social control over bodies, by literally building it into the design. Among other things, he invoked his very important concept of a "theory of technological politics" that understands certain innovations "as political technologies in their own right." (Winner 2001a: 2) Winner, in an earlier text, defines technological politics in the following way:

> "Technological politics, in this manner of seeing, encompasses the whole of technology's capacity to transform, order, and adapt animate and inanimate objects to accord with the purely technical structures and processes. It is the system of order and governance appropriate to a universe made artificial. To the extent that the human world becomes a product of rational artifice, it will fall under this mode of governance. Political reality becomes a set of institutions and practices shaped by the domination of technical requirements. The order which evolves is marked by stringent norms of performance, rigid structural limitations, and a tendency to alter subtly the human master's relationship to the technological slave…My selection of the term technological politics is meant to emphasize a point made again and again in the sources mentioned—that the rule of technological circumstances in the modern era does in fact supplant other ways of building, maintaining, choosing, acting, and enforcing, which are more commonly considered political." (Winner 2001b: 237)

Video games also possess the capacity to mirror the value systems of their makers. A game is like that low overpass which, by design, funnels us as players into some places and not others, that suggests some affordances and not others, that tells us where we belong, and where we do not. Games are, in every aspect of their construction, dense with layers of decisions that have been made, with rule-based, aesthetic, and ethical evaluations. They are a highly concentrated iteration of selections, evaluations, opinion, and an articulated sense of an envisioned target audience. In this sense, all video games have a technological politics. What this means is that they are capable of shaping outcomes in a technologized world through the modes of relations they open up, and foreclose upon.

The second sense of a politics of games pertains to conveying specific political viewpoints, or representing both fictive and historical political events within video games. While the conversation was brewing for several years prior, in 2018 a flurry of articles in games journalism were published high-

lighting the gulf between the brazenly political content of recent video game major title releases, and the refusal of game company representatives to discuss them in those terms. The primary debate was around whether games should contain overtly political topics – an extension of the charge that games are being taken over by liberal progressives who wish to inject their politics into games. Then, there was the pattern of game companies denying that politics exists within their games, despite overt political references, such as the representation of a modern-day civil war, or the resurgence of white supremacy groups, or a militia stand-off against law enforcement.

Terry Spier, creative director of Red Storm Entertainment, which delivered *Tom Clancy's The Division 2*, claimed the narrative which features a Washington D.C.-based narrative of a civil war in which the people take up arms against a corrupt government is "definitely not making any political statements." (Hall 2018; Alexandra 2018). Tommy Francois, Vice President of Editorial at Ubisoft addressed the topic by attempting to reframe the conversation around player freedom and providing realistic worlds as systems to engage with: "There's an avid intent to make these games as rich as real life," he said. "But we don't want to narrow it down to just political systems or views." (Ubisoft 2019) *Detroit: Become Human* (Quantic Dream, 2018) undeniably references the civil rights movement and specifically Martin Luther King, Jr., in a scenario involving the liberation of sentient robot servants. But is it only "really about androids" as Director David Cage claims? (Alexandra 2018: unpag.) From a critical cultural standpoint, these types of positions felt duplicitous. And, they seemed to – perhaps inadvertently – side with an ongoing toxic resistance to progressive interventions into game discourse (cf. Alexander 2014, Chess/Shaw 2015: 208-220).

As a result, progressive games journalists pushed back. Edwin Evans-Thirlwell blasted "technothriller" genre innovator Tom Clancy's "noxious" influence on the medium, whose branding of political thriller games "quietly advocate hawkish attitudes and philosophies while trying to lose the player in their lethal machinery, in the smooth interlocking components and command structures." (Evans-Thirlwell 2018). Ubisoft, which is responsible for major franchises like *Assassin's Creed*, *Far Cry*, and *Tom Clancy's* games, has been called out for repeatedly addressing political and historically fraught topics, but without being willing to overtly take a position on those themes (cf. Sinclair 2019; Schoppmeier 2019). These are only a few of the many examples. Games journalist Colin Campbell unpacked the refusal of game companies to discuss the politics in their games, concluding they want to "garner publicity

and a sense of cultural relevance but [...] avoid the challenge and expense of controversy." (Campbell 2018b) It is easy to understand the business move of avoiding the alienation of customers by refusing to verbalize a specific political stance. Still, it is ultimately a disingenuous position—especially when the game content overtly deals with narrative perspectivizations tied to historical or fictive revolutions, that signal fraught present-day tensions. Further, the whole framing of the question hinges on a presumption of the very possibility that any human expression within the context of society can exist outside of a politics, a false notion (or misdirection) that constructs the normative as apolitical, and alterity from the norm as exclusively political.[2] Accepting the fact of perspectivization as a precondition of any representation, means understanding that subjectivity, selection, and ultimately ideological positioning, are present in all narratives—not just some of them.

On rare occasion, game designers have been frank and unapologetic about the political nature of their games. Creative Director of *Days Gone* (SIE Bend Studios, 2019), John Garvin, spoke openly about political viewpoints being expressed within the game, and the strongly libertarian, right-wing, separatist, or even occasionally paranoid conspiracy bent (cf. Bailey 2019). *Days Gone* (which owned its politics from the beginning) initially presents itself as a fairly generic zombie-style apocalyptic survival horror narrative. However, with prolonged play, the game begins to open up as an extremely direct address of an American populist perspective whose force has gathered substantial traction within the United States since the Barack Obama presidency years. This occurs through the character representations, through scenarios encountered, and political rhetoric voiced.

What is revealed is a troubled and oppositional worldview, a fantasy of American self-reliance and right-wing populism that strongly resonates with a Trump-era nationalist turn (cf. Serhan 2020; Lamont/Park/Ayalo-Hurtado 2017: 153-180). *Days Gone* gathers up its affective political force in its narrative perspectivization of a dispossessed working class white male anti-hero, but also in its game spaces which model a survival-of-the-fittest elemental struggle, in its game mechanics of scavenging, combat, stealth, crafting, and

2 This is greatly explored in Marxist philosophy, perhaps one of the most influential examples being in Louis Althusser's concept of "interpellation". This concept outlines the process by which an individual enters into power relations with the state, simultaneously becoming a subject and being subjugated through ideological state apparatuses (cf. Althusser 1971).

navigating the wilderness. It models an America that is overrun with infected humans that must be taken back.[3] Regardless of one's receptiveness to the game's worldview, the game company's acknowledgement that they are contending with these challenging issues sends a strong message to the game community about normalizing the conversation around the political dimensions of video games. But his was a highly unusual position, one that refreshingly diverged from the standard fare of public relations that would ultimately evade this question.

I mention this nascent debate neither to reify the idea that some games are political while others are not, nor to encourage constraining the discussion to that false binary. Rather, I wish to point to a telling sensitivity within game culture. That reaction against the idea of video games as political objects signals a strong desire to control the nature of the discussion, to delimit its terms. But the games themselves, as mass culture forms, are far more complex than that. They are often riveting, troubling and quite brilliant—in short, incredibly revealing of dominant narratives.

Implicit Politics: Systems, Mechanics, Stories and Players

Story-based video games are incredibly complicated narrated worlds that operate on multiple levels, and ultimately require multi-faceted critical engagement with their systems, mechanics, stories and players. Narrative perspectivization as a concept can help game scholars and designers recognize that narrative games implicitly must take a particular vantage point in order to be represented. That vantage point has political dimensions, established through the systems, game mechanics, stories and even player subjectivity – not to mention the context in which the game came into being. This essay is not about faulting designers, or rigidly holding them to unattainable ethical standards. It is about removing ideological blinders that can actually help them do better work, and offering those who play games the tools to better appreciate the complexity of those designers' visions. It is about owning the fact that a video game, on every level of its conception and execution, is a perspective.

While it does complexify one's relation to the design process, operating in awareness of the dynamics of narrative perspectivization can open up pos-

3 I analyze this game in more detail in "America is Dead. Long Live America!: Political Affect in Days Gone" in the *European Journal of American Studies* (Murray 2021).

sibilities around other perspectives, and as yet untraveled new territories of innovative game design. Embracing the reality of perspectivization in the development and critical assessment of video games also eliminates a false and misleading binary between the video game as a medium of rational calculation, and as an expression of culture. This conversation can ultimately promote less troubled relations to the reality of politics in games on both the design and narrative level—and normalize the conversation of video games as political technologies. Truly, a video game is a series of interesting decisions; this is true not only for players, but for designers as well.

Acknowledgements:

The author wishes to thank Nora Scholz, Anja Burghardt, and Derek Conrad Murray.

Literature

Aarseth, Espen (2001): "Computer Game Studies, Year One", in: *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 1, no. 1 (July 2001), http://gamestudies.org/0101/editorial.html. (30.06.2021).

Alexander, Leigh (2012): „GDC 2012: Sid Meier on How to See Games as Sets of Interesting Decisions", in: *Gamasutra*, March 7, 2012, https://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/164869/GDC_2012_Sid_Meier_on_how_to_see_games_as_sets_of_interesting_decisions.php (30.06.2021).

Alexander, Leigh (2014): *Sexism, Lies and Video Games: The Culture War Nobody Is Winning*, http://time.com/3274247/video-game-culture-war/ (30.06.2021).

Alexandra, Heather (2018): "The Division 2 Is Political, Despite What Its Developers Say", in: *Kotaku*, June 12, 2018, https://kotaku.com/the-division-2-is-political-despite-what-its-developer-1826776710 (30.6.2021).

Althusser, Louis (1971): "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses", in: Id., *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster, New York.

Anderson, Diane (2000): *Tech Titans Turn to "The Fountainhead" for Comfort*, June 13, 2000, https://www.cnn.com/2000/TECH/computing/06/13/rand.tech.idg/ (30.06.2021).

Bailey, Kat (2019): "FEMA, Militias and Motorcycle Gangs: Days Gone's Apocalyptic Politics", in: *USgamer (blog)*, March 6, 2019, https://www.usgamer.net/articles/days-gone-interview (30.06.2021).

Benjamin, Walter (1968): "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", in: Hannah Arendt (ed.): *Illuminations*, New York.

Boghani, Priyanka (2012): "Anders Behring Breivik Played Call of Duty: Modern Warfare", in: *The World from PRX*, April 19, 2012, https://www.pri.org/stories/2012-04-19/anders-behring-breivik-played-call-duty-modern-warfare (30.06.2021).

Bogost, Ian (2010): *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*, Cambridge.

Campbell, Colin (2018a): "A Brief History of Blaming Video Games for Mass Murder", in: *Polygon*, March 10, 2018, https://www.polygon.com/2018/3/10/17101232/a-brief-history-of-video-game-violence-blame. (30.06.2021).

Campbell, Colin (2018b): "Why Are Game Companies so Afraid of the Politics in Their Games?", in: *Polygon*, June 20, 2018, https://www.polygon.com/2018/6/20/17480666/video-games-companies-lying-politics (30.06.2021).

Chang, Emily (2018): *Brotopia: Breaking up the Boys' Club of Silicon Valley*, New York.

Chess, Shira/Shaw, Adrienne (2015): "A Conspiracy of Fishes, or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying About #GamerGate and Embrace Hegemonic Masculinity", in: *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 59, no. 1 (January 2, 2015). https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2014.999917 (30.06.2021).

Chun, Wendy Hui Kyong (2013): *Programmed Visions: Software and Memory*, [Place of publication not identified].

Evans-Thirlwell, Edwin (2018): "If Ubisoft Wants to Cling on to Clancy, It's Time to Talk Politics", in: *Eurogamer*, June 22, 2018, https://www.eurogamer.net/amp/2018-06-20-the-oppressive-afterlife-of-tom-clancy?__twitter_impression=true (30.06.2021).

Flanagan, Mary/Nissenbaum, Helen (2014): *Values at Play in Digital Games*, Cambridge, Mass.

Hall, Charlie (2018): "Tom Clancy's The Division 2 'Is Not Making Any Political Statements'", in: *Polygon*, June 12, 2018, https://www.polygon.com/e3/2018/6/12/17451688/the-division-2-is-not-making-any-political-statements (30.06.2021).

Harrell, D. Fox (2013): *Phantasmal Media: An Approach to Imagination, Computation, and Expression*. Cambridge, Mass.

Hocking, Clint (2007): "Ludonarrative Dissonance in Bioshock - Click Nothing", in: *Blog, Click Nothing (blog)*, October 7, 2007, http://clicknothing.typepad.com/click_nothing/2007/10/ludonarrative-d.html (30.06.2021).

Igl, Natalia/Zeman, Sonja (2016): "Perspectives on Narrativity and Narrative Perspectivization", in: LinguisticApproachestoLiterature 21, Amsterdam/Philadelphia.

Kocurek, Carly A. (2012): "The Agony and the Exidy: A History of Video Game Violence and the Legacy of Death Race", in: *Game Studies* 12, no. 1 (September 2012), http://gamestudies.org/1201/articles/carly_kocurek (30.06.2021).

Kocurek, Carly A. (2019): "Night Trap: Moral Panic", in: Matthew Thomas Payne/Nina Huntemann (eds.), *How to Play Video Games*, New York.

Lamont, Michèle/Park, Bo Yun/Ayala-Hurtado, Elena (2017): "Trumps Electoral Speeches and His Appeal to the American White Working Class", in: *The British Journal of Sociology* 68, no. S1. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12315 (30.06.2021).

Murray, Soraya (2016): "Race, Gender, and Genre in Spec Ops: The Line", in: *Film Quarterly* v. 70, no. 2. https://doi.org/10.1525/fq.2016.70.2.38 (30.06.2021).

Murray, Soraya (2018): *On Video Games: The Visual Politics of Race, Gender and Space*, London.

Murray, Soraya (2020): "Horizons Already Here: Video Games and Landscape", in: *Art Journal* 79, no. 2. https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.2020.1765553 (30.06.2021).

Murray, Soraya (2021): "America is Dead. Long Live America!: Political Affect in Days Gone", in: *European Journal of American Studies*, 16 (3), http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/17409 (29.9.2021).

Schoppmeier, Sören (2019): "Playing to Make America Great Again: Far Cry 5 and the Politics of Videogames in an Age of Trumpism", in: *Current Objectives of Postgraduate American Studies* 20, no. 1. https://doi.org/10.5283/copas.307 (30.06.2021).

Serhan, Yasmeen (2020): "Populism Is Undefeated", in: *The Atlantic*, November 5, 2020, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/11/what-us-election-proved-about-populism/617003/ (30.06.2021).

Sheffield, Brandon/Caoili, Eric (2009): "GDC: Keita Takahashi - The Complete GDC Lecture", in: *Gamasutra*, March 27, 2009. /view/news/113886/GDC_Keita_Takahashi__The_Complete_GDC_Lecture.php (30.06.2021).

Sicart, Miguel (2011): *The Ethics of Computer Games*, Cambridge, Mass./London.

Sicart, Miguel (2013): *Beyond Choices: The Design of Ethical Gameplay*, Cambridge, Mass.

Sinclair, Brendan (2019): "Ubisoft Says Avoiding Messages Is Part of Making 'More Mature Games'", in: *GamesIndustry.biz*, June 7, 2019, https://www.ga

mesindustry.biz/articles/2019-06-07-ubisoft-says-avoiding-messages-is-part-of-making-more-mature-games (30.06.2021).

Thi, Nguyen C./Zagal, José P. (2016): "Good Violence, Bad Violence: The Ethics of Competition in Multiplayer Games", in: *DiGRA/FDG '16 - Proceedings of the First International Joint Conference of DiGRA and FDG*, vol. 13, 1 (Digital Games Research Association and Society for the Advancement of the Science of Digital Games 2016, Dundee, Scotland: Digital Games Research Association and Society for the Advancement of the Science of Digital Games, 2016), http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/paper_39.pdf (30.06.2021).

Ubisoft Q&A (2019): *Balancing Player Freedom with Politics – Q&A with Tommy Francois, VP of Editorial*, June 7, 2019, https://news.ubisoft.com/en-us/article/351154/Balancing-Player-Freedom-with-Politics-Q-A-with-Tommy-Francois-VP-of-Editorial (30.06.2021).

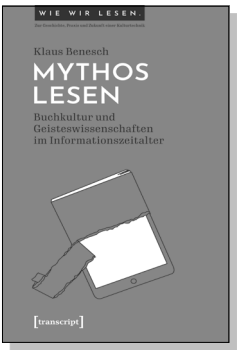
Wakefield, Jane (2018): "Gaming Addiction Classified as Disorder", in: *BBC News*, January 2, 2018, sec. Technology, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-42541404 (30.06.2021).

Winner, Langdon (2001a): *The Whale and the Reactor: A Search for Limits in an Age of High Technology*, Chicago. Originally published 1986.

Winner, Langdon (2001b): *Autonomous Technology: Technics-out-of-Control as a Theme in Political Thought*, Cambridge, Mass., Originally published in 1977.

Zagal, José P. (2009): "Ethically Notable Videogames: Moral Dilemmas and Gameplay," in: *Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Games, Play, Practice and Theory. Proceedings of DiGRA*, http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/09287.07241.pdf (30.06.2021).

Literaturwissenschaft



Klaus Benesch

Mythos Lesen

Buchkultur und Geisteswissenschaften im Informationszeitalter

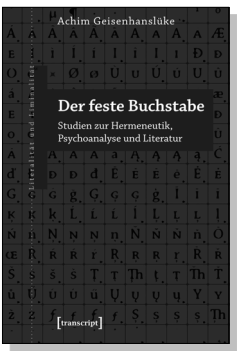
März 2021, 96 S., Klappbroschur, Dispersionsbindung
15,00 € (DE), 978-3-8376-5655-8
E-Book:
PDF: 12,99 € (DE), ISBN 978-3-8394-5655-2

Werner Sollors

Schrift in bildender Kunst

Von ägyptischen Schreibern zu lesenden Madonnen

2020, 150 S., kart., Dispersionsbindung,
14 Farbabbildungen, 5 SW-Abbildungen
16,50 € (DE), 978-3-8376-5298-7
E-Book:
PDF: 14,99 € (DE), ISBN 978-3-8394-5298-1



Achim Geisenhanslüke

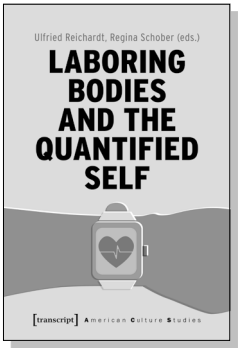
Der feste Buchstabe

Studien zur Hermeneutik, Psychoanalyse und Literatur

Januar 2021, 238 S., kart.
38,00 € (DE), 978-3-8376-5506-3
E-Book:
PDF: 37,99 € (DE), ISBN 978-3-8394-5506-7

Leseproben, weitere Informationen und Bestellmöglichkeiten finden Sie unter www.transcript-verlag.de

Literaturwissenschaft



Ulfried Reichardt, Regina Schober (eds.)
Laboring Bodies and the Quantified Self

2020, 246 p., pb.
40,00 € (DE), 978-3-8376-4921-5
E-Book:
PDF: 39,99 € (DE), ISBN 978-3-8394-4921-9

Renata Cornejo, Gesine Lenore Schiewer,
Manfred Weinberg (Hg.)
Konzepte der Interkulturalität in der Germanistik weltweit

2020, 432 S., kart., Dispersionsbindung, 6 SW-Abbildungen
50,00 € (DE), 978-3-8376-5041-9
E-Book: kostenlos erhältlich als Open-Access-Publikation
PDF: ISBN 978-3-8394-5041-3

Wilhelm Amann, Till Dembeck, Dieter Heimböckel, Georg Mein,
Gesine Lenore Schiewer, Heinz Sieburg (Hg.)
Zeitschrift für interkulturelle Germanistik
11. Jahrgang, 2020, Heft 2:
Das Meer als Raum transkultureller Erinnerungen

Januar 2021, 258 S., kart., Dispersionsbindung,
25 SW-Abbildungen
12,80 € (DE), 978-3-8376-4945-1
E-Book: kostenlos erhältlich als Open-Access-Publikation
PDF: ISBN 978-3-8394-4945-5

Leseproben, weitere Informationen und Bestellmöglichkeiten finden Sie unter www.transcript-verlag.de